

# THE PASSIONS IN PLAY

*Thyestes and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*

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CHAPTER I

*Poetry, passions and knowledge*

iterque populis Ditis ad superos datur  
(Seneca, *Oedipus* 573)

negat enim sine furore Democritus  
quemquam poetam magnum esse  
posse, quod idem dicit Plato  
(Cicero, *De divinatione* 1.80)

I

At the core of Seneca's *Oedipus* stands Creon's stunning narrative of his search for a truth that has so far escaped his fellow-citizens, even that cunning antonomastic observer, the king of Thebes. Overcoming a deep reluctance to speak, on account of Oedipus' threats, Creon retells his experience in all its gory detail (509–658). Suitably enough, the setting for his account is grim and terrifying, remote and obscure: 'there is, far from the city, a wood dark with ilex-trees near the well-watered vale of Dirce's fount' (*est procul ab urbe lucus ilicibus niger | Dircaea circa vallis inriguae loca*, 530–1).<sup>1</sup> It is in this extraordinary location, whose wilderness is the usual environment for magical contacts with the divine, that the *sacerdos* (548), soon referred to as a *vates* (552), begins his portentous rites. The prophet, who is possessed by divine powers, intones a magic song: 'he unfolds a magic song, and, with frenzied lips, he chants a charm which appeases or stirs the evanescent ghosts' (561–3: *carmenque magicum volvit et rabido minax | decantat ore quidquid aut placat leves | aut cogit umbras*), then 'sings again, and looking at the ground, summons the shades with a deeper, stunned voice' (567–8: *canitque rursus ac terram intuens | graviore manes voce et attonita citat*). Thus he succeeds in evoking the ghosts of the dead: "I am heard," says the priest; "I have uttered prevailing words; blind Chaos

<sup>1</sup> For a comparable setting in *Thy.* 641–90 and its interpretation see ch. 4.

is burst open, and for the people of Dis a way is given to those living on earth” (571–3: ‘*audior vates ait, | rata verba fudi: rumpitur caecum chaos | iterque populis Ditis ad superos datur*’).

The prophet’s invocation has horrific consequences: ‘trembling’ (*horror*, 576) shakes the grove, the earth splits open (582–6), and a triumphal procession of infernal creatures abandons its chthonic dens: ‘then grim Erinys sounded, and blind Fury and Horror, and all the forms that eternal darkness creates and hides’ (590–2: *tum torva Erinys sonuit et caecus Furor | Horrorque et una quidquid aeternae creant | celantque tenebrae*). There follow (592–4) ‘Grief’ (*Luctus*), ‘Disease’ (*Morbus*), ‘Old Age’ (*Senectus*), ‘Fear’ (*Metus*) and ‘Pestilence’ (*Pestis*).<sup>2</sup> The prophet is not disturbed by this, unlike Manto (595–6). Then other ghosts appear: Zethus, Amphion, Niobe, Agave with the Bacchantes, and Pentheus, a catalogue of tragic figures.<sup>3</sup> Last, apart from the crowd, Laius shows his face, and speaking ‘in a rabid voice’ (*ore rabido*, 626), reveals the cause and nature of the plague.

This scene powerfully enacts what poetry and poets do. The traditional connection between the magic and prophetic power of poets and seers, crystallized in the multifaceted use of the words *vates* and *carmen*, finds here a contextual motivation.<sup>4</sup> The *vates*, who through his song, that is, through carefully chosen words endowed with active power, *rata verba*, can bring to life the underworld’s demonic creatures, is analogous to the poet, whose inspiration vivifies the characters of tragedy. The regenerative powers of the *vates* and the poet intersect in the parade of tragic characters described at 611–18: both the *vates*<sup>5</sup> and the poet can access a domain open

<sup>2</sup> *Violenta fata, horridus Morbi tremor, Macies, Pestis* and *Dolor* close off the tragedy in Jocasta’s final invocation at 1059–60. A different list of personifications appears in *Her. F.* 96–8 and 690–6 (see Fitch (1987) 150 and 300), recalling *Virg. Aen.* 6.273–81. At Ovid, *Met.* 4.484–5 *Luctus, Pavor, Terror* and *Insania* escort Tisiphone back on earth as instruments of Juno’s rage. See also the metaliterary cortège of *Fama* at *Met.* 12.59–61 (*Credulitas, Error, Laetitia, Timores, Seditio, Susurri*), with Zumwalt (1977) and Feeney (1991) 247–9.

<sup>3</sup> Zethus and Amphion (whose mother Odysseus meets in the underworld: *Od.* 11.260–5) figure in Euripides’ lost, but once very famous, *Antiopa* (177–227 Nauck<sup>2</sup>), and in Pacuvius’ tragedy by the same name (1–20a Ribbeck<sup>2</sup>). They build the walls of Thebes by playing on the lyre (Hes. fr. 182 Merkelbach and West). Niobe, Tantalus’ daughter and Amphion’s wife, gives her name to tragedies by Aeschylus and Sophocles. The subject was popular for plays and mimes well into imperial times, if Nero is reported to have sung that very role (Suet. *Nero* 21). Agave and Pentheus appear in Euripides’ and Accius’ *Bacchae*, and in Pacuvius’ *Pentheus* (for which we have only Servius’ argument, *ad Aen.* 4.469). All these characters are Theban; on Thebes as a privileged *locus* of tragedy see Zeitlin (1990), a classic paper.

<sup>4</sup> On *vates* see Newman (1967). The intersection of meanings between *vates* and *sacerdos* in passages such as *Hor. Carm.* 3.1.2–3 or *Prop.* 3.1.3 is also relevant (see the use of *sacerdos* at *Oed.* 548). On the importance of the concept of *vates* in Lucan see O’Higgins (1988) and Masters (1992). On *carmen* see Sharrock (1994) 63–4.

<sup>5</sup> The term *vates* does not appear to refer directly to dramatic poets, nor would it be possible for this particular self-reflexive narrative, which is necessarily linked with a mythic plot, to stage anything like

only to a non-rational, horrific form of Dionysiac inspiration,<sup>6</sup> and both testify to the limits of a rigid faith in rational forms of explanation.<sup>7</sup>

## II

When the play opened, we saw Thebes being slowly destroyed by the plague, and Oedipus paralysed by fear, after the Delphic oracle predicted the monstrous deeds he has in fact already accomplished. We are told that he fears ‘unspeakable things’ (*infanda timeo*, 15), yet his reaction is portrayed as excessive: such a situation should be confronted with reasoned poise, but Oedipus is completely engulfed by passions, as he declares at 25–7:

cum magna horreas,  
quod posse fieri non putes metuas tamen:  
cuncta expavesco meque non credo mihi.

When you dread some great calamity, you must fear also events which you think cannot happen. I dread every thing, and I do not trust even myself.

Jocasta’s exhortation at 82–6 confirms that we are to consider Oedipus’ emotions excessive, if not altogether unjustified:

regium hoc ipsum reor:  
adversa capere, quoque sit dubius magis  
status et cadentis imperi moles labet,  
hoc stare certo pressius fortem gradu:  
haud est virile terga Fortunae dare.

This very thing, I believe, is regal: to contain adversity and, the more dubious your station and the more the greatness of power wavers, the more to stand firm, brave, with unflinching foot. It is not a man’s part to turn the back to Fortune.

This overwhelming fear is the real motor of the tragedy (not so, famously, in Sophocles). It is this that spurs Oedipus to engage in his painful search for truth through a tortuous path. His first chance to discover the truth is in fact vitiated by a residual trust in reason. In the scene beginning at

a properly named *poeta*. In Horace’s *Letter to Augustus* (*Epist.* 2.1.211–13), the tragic poet is equated with a *magus* who ‘with inanities wrings my heart, inflames, soothes, fills it with false terrors like a magician, and sets me down now at Thebes, now at Athens’.

<sup>6</sup> Further observations below, ch. 3, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> By stressing the ‘irrational’ passions at work in the tragedies I do not want to deny the importance of the rational elements of artistry and craftsmanship which play an extremely prominent part in these texts. On the contrary, it is precisely thanks to the elaborate forms of its ‘mannerist’ rhetoric that ‘irrational’ and disruptive contents find their expression: ‘the figure is the perpetual tribute paid – and how willingly it is paid – by the language of the conscious ego to the unconscious’ (Orlando (1978) 169).

line 202, Creon brings the intricate and convoluted *vaticinium* of the Pythia (211; 213–14), but the king replies that he can easily handle the task, since this is precisely his prerogative: ‘to read riddles to Oedipus alone is given’ (216: *ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur*). Oedipus’ trust in his rational faculties outlasts even Creon’s second and much more explicit description of a magical rite, as Oedipus, while trying to deny the impact of what he has just heard, boasts that he knows himself better than the gods do: ‘and yet my soul, conscious of innocence and known to itself better than to the gods, makes denial’ (766–7: *sed animus contra innocens | sibi que melius quam deis notus negat*). In the face of this new and powerful challenge he will have to delegate his responsibilities more than once, and will confess to the impotence of his vaunted rational skills. The real breakthrough in learning the truth occurs only because of the elaborate magic rite organized by Tiresias and Manto and reported to Oedipus by Creon. I want now to consider this compelling scene which lies at the structural and emotional centre of the play.

When Creon and Oedipus meet, the king asks his brother-in-law to reveal the results of his consultation with the inhabitants of the underworld. The stichomythic dialogue (509–29) leading up to Creon’s long speech (530–658) is best read alongside a similar exchange between the Fury and Tantalus in the prologue of *Thyestes*, where Tantalus tries to resist the Fury’s order to bring to earth the ‘crimes’ (*scelera*) that actually constitute the play. His refusal to provoke *scelera* is a refusal to produce the words that recreate that *scelus* in the play. In *Oedipus*, Creon begs for the right to be silent, and Oedipus, like the Fury, must persuade him with force. Just as the words of Tantalus come into existence only because violence quashes his intransigence, Creon’s revelation is similarly marked as a forced confession of truths which he claims are best left unsaid.

Further details concerning the relationship between the various characters should be taken into account. Oedipus, the *vates* and Laius are structurally linked. Oedipus consults Creon, who turns to the priest, who is then able to interrogate Laius. As is fitting in a *mise en abyme*,<sup>8</sup> the inset scene is a microcosm of the larger framework, and this makes reflection perceptible. It is significant that Laius speaks with the same ‘rabid voice’ (*ore rabido*, 626) with which he had been summoned by the *vates* (*rabido... | ... ore*, 561–2). With different degrees of power and knowledge, these three characters all embody a desperate search for truth, the very search that motivates the tragedy from its inception. Oedipus opens the

<sup>8</sup> The standard treatment of *mise en abyme* is still Dällenbach (1977).

play with his investigation, and the answer to his questions will come only from tragedy. The search for truth thus becomes a search for poetry.<sup>9</sup>

The uncontrolled fear that pushes Seneca's Oedipus to search for explanations (unlike his Sophoclean counterpart)<sup>10</sup> eventually leads him to discover in the song of Laius the truth he was afraid to know. Passion leads to poetry, and poetry is the revelation of truths carefully hidden from the upper world of reason and power. As the *vates* literally finds a way for the creatures of Acheron to come back to earth (573: *iter... populis Ditis ad superos datur*), so Laius allows a terrible and suppressed truth to be voiced and heard. Poetry evokes Erinys, the new Muse of this poetry, but also the sources of a deeper knowledge, one which Oedipus' proud rationality had failed to grasp.

Knowledge can be found in a poetry which is profoundly passionate in its origins and inevitably chthonic in its appearance. It is a knowledge which exists and acts in lieu of reason and against it. At the end of the play, Oedipus, the cunning thinker and observer, the man who boasts his ability to interpret 'traces' (*vestigium*, 768) in his search for truth, ultimately destroys the instrument and symbol of his reason. Vision had already proved to be an unreliable source of knowledge. In the scene starting at line 303, Manto describes every phase of a sacrifice to Tiresias, who tries to understand why the plague is destroying Thebes. In spite of Manto's accurate report, however, Tiresias admits finally that the truth cannot be found in this way, and *alia temptanda est via* (392). (It is worth noting, again, that great emphasis is placed on the medium of analysis: Tiresias' blindness, which requires Manto's description, emphasizes the problematic status of vision more than an eye-witness account would have done.) The analysis of signs through the eyes, the ultimate rational pursuit which recalls Oedipus' pride in his rational faculties, is doomed to failure. As Tiresias explains, the usual signs cannot 'express the name' of the culprit (390–4).<sup>11</sup> As he gouges out his eyes Oedipus becomes a second Tiresias, thereby implicitly recognizing the blind seer's superior cognitive power (971),<sup>12</sup> a power deeply rooted in the chthonic realm of blood and passions.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This relationship is foregrounded by the fact that Oedipus had failed to draw useful conclusions from Manto's prophecy at 233–8, because at that stage he was still proudly relying on his rational abilities. He failed to understand the oracle himself, but he took reasonable and obvious steps towards solving the enigma. In parallel fashion, the text did not emphasize at that point the 'poetic' character of the prophetess's song, who was nonetheless called *vates* (230) and acted near the *fontes Castalia*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bartezzaghi (1988).

<sup>11</sup> On *alia temptanda est via* see below, pp. 226–7.

<sup>12</sup> See 'night', *nox* (977); 'darkness', *tenebrae* (999).

<sup>13</sup> See the string of adjectives at 551–5: *funesto* (551), *lugubris* (553), *squalente* (554), *mortifera* (555).

## III

Seneca's tragedies offer repeated and complex descriptions of the passions in action and of the effects of passions on both agents and victims. My intention in this chapter, however, is not to analyse the passions which animate the characters themselves – Medea's and Phaedra's destructive love, for instance, Atreus' thirst for revenge, or Thyestes' own quivering determination to resist passion. Rather, I aim to examine the way in which these characters establish a connection between passions and poetic creation, and thus problematize the relationship between passions and aesthetic pleasure. The basic assumption of my enquiry, which I have already put to work in my reading of the central rhesis in *Oedipus* is that, at several critical junctures, the actions of certain characters embody a reflection of the text on itself and offer important insights into its poetics. Senecan tragedy is a highly metadramatic form of theatre; that is, one highly self-conscious in its reflection on the nature and modes of its existence. In this respect, Seneca's metapoetic concerns are clearly on a par with those that animate works such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Lucan's *Bellum Civile*.<sup>14</sup> After Virgil, poetry appears increasingly unable to resist the compulsion to mirror in its own body the processes of composition and the narrative mechanisms that make it possible. Succumbing to this temptation can produce the pleasing, if slightly dizzying, effect of the mirror reflecting its image onto another mirror, endlessly complicating the modalities of reference. But it can also produce a sense of enclosure bordering on anguish. For such a mistake, after all, Narcissus dies.

Such a line of enquiry forces the critic to confront similar dangers. It does offer, however, considerable strategic advantages over approaching the tragedies armed prevalently or exclusively with references to Seneca's prose works, as if they could be considered a theoretical, systematic explanation of the convoluted, dense universe of the tragedies. The prose works, too, can be shown to oscillate between points of view, and to display self-repressive tendencies.<sup>15</sup> If we are to link the tragedies to the prose works, we should at least be ready to dispose of any rash assumptions of hierarchy, and to see the connection going both ways. There is no reason to believe that the explicit statements of the prose works should have a higher claim to 'truth' than the tragedies, and thus be used to muffle the potential disruptiveness of the tragedies.

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the role played by metapoetic elements in Ovid see Rosati (1983) and Hinds (1987); for Lucan see Masters (1992). On Senecan tragedy Boyle (1997) 193–207 is especially good.

<sup>15</sup> See pp. 20–1 later in this chapter.

While I cannot review in detail here the extensive critical debate on metadrama, some elements should be clearly established.<sup>16</sup> ‘Metadrama’ and ‘metatheatre’, terms which play a prominent role in the modern theorization of the theatrical experience, encompass a variety of phenomena. It is useful, therefore, to retain Abel’s original term ‘metatheatre’ in order to designate only that most elaborate and (from a structural point of view) least ambiguous of ‘meta’-phenomena, the ‘theatre-in-the-theatre – a phenomenon which is as structurally constrained as it is historically circumscribed’.<sup>17</sup> ‘Metadrama’, on the other hand, embraces more varied and often less intrusive ‘peripheral forms’<sup>18</sup> which bear important semi-otic implications. As the equivalent in theatrical terms to ‘metanarrative’, ‘metadrama’ can usefully indicate moments when the play, through a variety of devices, reflects on itself and its functioning.

There are no proper ‘metatheatrical’ elements in Senecan tragedy, no techniques that fracture the ‘fourth wall’, and the dramatic illusion with it. Even in *Thyestes* the fictional illusion is never directly challenged and broken, and, although I will often refer to Atreus’ ‘performance’, the tragedy hosts no formalized, Shakespearean play-within-the-play, no Plautine slave ready to step aside and address the audience outside the boundaries of fictionality.<sup>19</sup> Yet it would be difficult to play down the structural elements which, I will argue, make the audience aware of the constructedness of the performance by distinguishing between different dramatic levels. A pivotal role in such a complex structure is played by the recessing frames which encompass distinct sections of the tragedy. Framing, as I will suggest,<sup>20</sup> is a structuring criterion which massively influences the audience reaction to the play. Although framing and metadrama are likely allies, framing by itself need not be metadramatic, and both terms should thus be retained in order to account for two different aspects of Senecan tragedy. As a working definition, which I will refine as I proceed, I will therefore consider to be ‘metadramatic’ the elements in the play that are explicitly concerned with the structural arrangement and the internal

<sup>16</sup> Important insights on metadrama, and further bibliography, can be found in Hornby (1986). I have benefited mostly from Schmeling (1982), as well as from Hamon (1977), Prince (1977), Hutcheon (1984) and Stam (1992). Although his notion of metatheatre does not directly bear on my argument, Abel (1963) – who coined the term – is essential reading. Calderwood ((1971) 4–7) has useful remarks on the notion of metadrama that I will employ, which is not limited to ‘forays across or . . . around the borders between fiction and reality’, but is based on the assumption that plays are ‘also about’ plays.

<sup>17</sup> Abel (1963).

<sup>18</sup> I adopt a distinction suggested by Schmeling (1982) 10. See Schmeling (1982) 5 for a list of various phenomena, all to a certain extent ‘metadramatic’.

<sup>19</sup> See Slater (1985), and especially M. Barchiesi (1981) 147–74. <sup>20</sup> See below, pp. 45–61.

organization of the drama, especially as they focus on the 'authorial' role of certain characters, even if those references do not trespass the boundaries set up by the scenic space. For example, I will regard as metadramatic those parts of *Thyestes* which are extensively concerned with the preparation and the *mise en scène* of Atreus' revenge, although neither the prologue nor act 2 breaks the barrier of scenic illusion. Atreus and other Senecan characters who also wear the robe of inspired creator transcend their role as characters *in* the play and go on to assume, implicitly but clearly, some of the functions that other forms of poetry assign to internal narrators. Endowed with a knowledge of events that is far superior to that of their fellow-characters (it is they, after all, who steer the plot in the desired direction), Atreus and his metadramatic colleagues double up as authors-on-stage and constantly remind us of the non-realistic nature of the staged events. It is no coincidence that metadrama plays such a vital role in tragedies which can only be products of an intensely self-conscious literary project. In Seneca's Rome, tragedy is a form of expression which has by now lost the relative – ritual and political – immediacy which it enjoyed in its original Greek setting, and even, it could be argued, in the early stages of Roman literature. When Seneca writes his tragedies, writing tragedy inevitably appears to be a problematic, regressive operation: the metadramatic layers detectable in many Senecan plays testify to the harrowing complexity of that project.

In other ways, of course, Seneca's Rome is also one big theatrical stage, where power is constantly enacted and represented, and where, to borrow Dupont's phrase, the actor is king – and the king is an actor. If power is necessarily predicated on a careful orchestration of symbols, Imperial Rome is in many ways the quintessential 'theatre of power'.<sup>21</sup>

A final caveat. For twenty-first-century readers (and critics) the concept of self-reflexive, metadramatic or 'narcissistic' texts is reasonably familiar, if nothing else because of the extensive metanarrative inclinations of that most successful modern literary genre, the novel. Hardly less important is the use of metanarrative structures in contemporary cinema.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not we accept the suggestion that the novel has always harboured from the very beginning the 'seeds' of a 'narcissistic' reading,<sup>23</sup> we must acknowledge that metanarrative devices abound even in novels which have nothing in common with the most explicit products of *nouveau roman*. Yet it is precisely our familiarity with these ideas that risks impairing our

<sup>21</sup> See Dupont (1985), with Woodman (1992) and Bartsch (1994).

<sup>22</sup> The topic is well treated by Stam (1992), with ample bibliography.

<sup>23</sup> Hutcheon (1984) 23.

understanding of its ancient counterpart. In modern fiction, metanarration is actively opposed to realism: the reader is constantly reminded of the fictional status of the representation. In the case of Senecan tragedy it would be misguided simply to see ‘narcissistic’ tendencies set against aspirations to realism. What forms of realism, if any, we can detect in ancient literature is, of course, a major question of literary history; among other factors, significant epistemological issues are involved here.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Greek tragedy flirts constantly with the temptation – or illusion – of portraying reality, Senecan tragedy is seemingly oblivious to its allure. Therefore an understanding of metanarrative in the tragedies must necessarily be attuned both to the specific issues raised by Seneca’s writing and to the inclinations of Latin literature at that time.<sup>25</sup> A distinction should, of course, be observed between ‘realism’ and ‘reality’. Senecan drama is emphatically alien to realistic forms of representation, despite the fact that some elements of ‘reality’ (itself a tricky term) can indeed find their non-realistic representation there. However, more often than not the attempts to read some of the plays as *tragédies à clef*, starring Nero as Oedipus or Agrippina as Phaedra, look reductive and unconvincing.<sup>26</sup> What the tragedies tell us about Seneca’s Rome is more interesting and less obvious.

## IV

It is a mark of self-reflexivity in Seneca’s tragedies that the character who controls the dramatic action and displays superior knowledge and power on stage can often be seen as embodying the playwright, and can thus offer implicit insight into the poetics of the play. There are several candidates for this metadramatic role: Juno in *Hercules furens*, Medea, Atreus.<sup>27</sup> I want to focus again, however, on a less typical and more complicated case, that of *Oedipus*.

First, a brief detour. A passage from *Medea* offers an interesting introduction to the way in which certain parts of Seneca’s tragedies can tell us a great deal about how the author represents his own function. This does not mean, obviously, that they should be taken as public confessions of

<sup>24</sup> It would be interesting to combine Auerbach’s (1959) treatment of realism with an analysis of metanarrative structures. This is particularly true in the case of a text of enormous density such as Petronius’ *Satyricon*, whose metafictional elements are prominently displayed.

<sup>25</sup> I will return to the whole question sketched here several times in the course of this book.

<sup>26</sup> See Calder (1976–77), an excellent discussion.

<sup>27</sup> I will deal in ch. 3 with how Atreus fits into this group of female characters.

the historical author, or that, *qua* metadramatic, they should have a higher claim to authenticity and univocity than anything else in the tragedy: they merely represent important moments for the text to reflect on itself and its poetics.

In the prologue Medea seeks to transform the storm of her emotions (*mens intus agitat*, 47) into a revenge-plot. In doing this she is the prime mover of the play, and thus already close to embodying a quasi-authorial function. Medea's decision to find a 'way' (*viam*, 40) for her revenge and, later, her selection of the most appropriate means to do so, and her careful realization of her plans – all constitute the decision to create and represent a tragedy. In this respect, Medea is similar to other characters who occupy a central position in Senecan plays: Juno in *Hercules furens* or Atreus in *Thyestes*. Indeed, Atreus' first line on stage – 176: *ignave, iners, enervis...*, 'undaring, unskilled, unnerved...' – echoes Euripides, *Medea* 807–8: 'let no one consider me impotent (φάσλην), weak (κἀσθενῆ) or spiritless (ἡσυχαίαν)'.<sup>28</sup> All appear on stage debating their vengeful plots out loud and giving voice to the torments of creation.<sup>29</sup>

In search of inspiration for her actions Medea invokes divine powers 'with an ominous voice', *voce non fausta* (12). The invocation<sup>30</sup> to her idiosyncratic Muses follows the regular form of *klēsis* (13–17):

nunc, nunc adeste sceleris ultrices deae,  
 crinem solutis squalidae serpentibus,  
 atram cruentis manibus amplexae facem,  
 adeste, thalamis horridae quondam meis  
 quales stetitistis . . .

Now, now, come to help me, goddesses who avenge wickedness, your hair defiled with dishevelled serpents; grasping black torches in bloodstained hands, come to help me, as grim as you were when you stood outside my wedding chamber.

Now, while she prays that the Furies approach with their dirty hair and black torches, she echoes the poet's invocations for divine inspiration and concludes her proem, some thirty lines later, with a clear indication of the

<sup>28</sup> The connection is particularly interesting in the light of the metaliterary resonances of line 176 itself; see below, pp. 131–2. Note also the possible connection between *Thy.* 257 and Eur. *Med.* 376–80, where Atreus and Medea discuss various options of revenge. The connection may be flagged by *via* at 244 (*profare, dirum qua caput mactem via*), cf. θανασίμους ὁδοῦς at *Med.* 376. A connection with Accius may also be discernible, see p. 81, n. 24.

<sup>29</sup> On the prologue to *Hercules furens* see below, pp. 183–4.

<sup>30</sup> See Petrone (1984) 13–14 and Nussbaum (1994) 445.

forces she intends to rely on. *Ira* and *furor*, Medea claims, will drive her actions, and the plot with them (45–52):

effera ignota horrida,  
tremenda caelo pariter ac terris mala  
mens intus agitat: vulnera et caedem et vagum  
funus per artus – levia memoravi nimis:  
haec virgo feci; gravior exurgat dolor:  
maiora iam me scelera post partus decent.  
accingere ira teque in exitium para  
furore toto.

Wild deeds, unheard-of, horrible, calamities at which heaven and earth alike shall tremble, my heart deep within is planning – wounds, slaughter, death, creeping from limb to limb. Ah, too trivial the deeds I have rehearsed; these things I did in girlhood. Let my grief rise to more deadly strength; greater crimes become me, now that I am a mother. Gird yourself with wrath, and prepare for deadly deeds with the full force of madness.

Medea seems to be aware of the essentially literary nature of her pursuit. Not only in the sense captured by Wilamowitz's dictum that she must have read Euripides' tragedy about herself,<sup>31</sup> but also because she explicitly hopes for *literary* recognition of her deeds. Directly after the invocation to her 'Muses' which we have just read, she goads herself by saying 'let your repudiation be told as equal to your wedding' (*paria narrentur tua | repudia thalamis*, 52–3). The tragedy we are watching fulfils this wish. In a similar fashion, Atreus vows that his revenge must not be approved by anyone in future, but nor must it be passed over in silence: *age, anime, fac quod nulla posteritas probet, | sed nulla taceat* (192–3).

The *mise en abyme* (of sorts) from *Oedipus* is the one that delves deepest into the reconstruction of creative processes, and also the one that spotlights most forcefully what begins to appear as the circular nature of these processes. Fear will lead to poetry, and poetry will produce fear. But the metadramatic resonance of *Oedipus* is also different in important respects from that of other plays. To a limited extent, Oedipus embodies the functions of the playwright, as do Medea, Juno or Atreus. His quest for truth is the *raison d'être* of the tragedy and its catalyst, alongside Medea's, Juno's and Atreus' thirst for revenge. But he must delegate these functions to

<sup>31</sup> Wilamowitz (1919) III.162. It is precisely her awareness of being 'a Medea' (910: *Medea nunc sum*, which harks back to 171: NUT. *Medea* – ME. *fiam*), of being part of a literary universe, that substantiates Medea's metadramatic character.

other characters, presumably because his persistent trust in reason makes him unwilling to yield fully to the forces of inspiration and poetry. In the end, poetry and truth will come from a real 'prophet', a *vates*.

Oedipus immediately rejects the truth offered to him, relying on the deceptive evidence that Merope is in fact married to Polybus. It will take a whole new act of the play, and a careful analysis of 'traces' (*vestigia*), for him to accept that he himself is the culprit. This delay between Laius' revelation and Oedipus' refusal to accept it intensifies the tragic irony that permeates the play. At this point, it is really only Oedipus, ever the cunning investigator, who continues to believe in reason and refuses to see the truth which the chthonic force of poetry laid out in no uncertain terms. His reaction to Laius' revelation is to suspect that the *vates* and Creon are plotting to seize the throne (669–70). Oedipus' staunch defence of his rational methods of pursuing truth and his consequent denial that passions can give answers to his doubts relate directly to his continued grip on power even in the face of overwhelming adversity. His tragedy dramatizes the relationship between poetry, passion and truth, and identifies a clear winner, since passion is shown to contain the seeds of truth and lead to its full discovery.

We are now able to appreciate a fundamental difference in the way that Oedipus fulfils his responsibilities as protagonist and prime mover of the tragedy in comparison to Medea or Atreus. He does not enjoy the privileged, omniscient point of view of the author as they do. Stirred by passion, he instigates a drama, but one which he cannot control and which will eventually turn against him. Medea and Atreus act within the plots they have constructed, while remaining unchallenged masters of their plans. Their authorial function is always foregrounded and never challenged. Oedipus, on the other hand, quickly abandons his role as the omniscient author-on-stage and reveals his nature as an impotent spectator, repeatedly threatened by events outside his control. The enormous force of Oedipus' dramatic consistency is predicated precisely on his double status as author and spectator. He sets in motion the search for poetry, which will turn him into a desperate victim – a guilty one, in fact. For us, he embodies the dangers associated as much with yielding to, as with resisting passions. Thus his plight dramatizes *one* of the hermeneutic possibilities offered to spectators. This tragedy represents the dangers of Oedipus' passions, and, at the same time, the futility of denying that passions have a valid claim to truth. Poetry is a passion, not only for the enthusiastic author who creates it, but also for the audience which receives it.

The contrast between passion and reason, which I have chosen to foreground, is often named as the crucial tension animating these tragedies. However, I should point out again that I will not focus primarily on the usual issues concerning the articulation of passions in the plays. My main topic in this preliminary chapter remains a more specific one: how passions can be described as the driving force not just behind the actions of several characters but also behind the very existence of the tragedies as we read them, and especially how this genetic function is represented in the tragedies. As we will see in chapter two, this genetic force operates at more than one level, since passion underlies the Fury's determination to put in motion Atreus' revenge, just as passion – for Aerope and for power – had motivated Thyestes' initial attack on Atreus.

By entertaining the hypothesis that passions might generate tragic poetry we are forced to face a set of familiar questions about the relationship between the tragedies and the rest of Seneca's corpus. Yet one could reasonably claim that those questions are, in a sense, irrelevant. For instance, it could be argued that we should read each tragedy as a separate and self-standing unit. Or that the attempt to relate the tragedies at any cost to Senecan philosophy is a *petitio principii*: we ask how the tragedies can be compatible with the author's philosophy because we have already decided that they should be since they were written by the same person. But, in a sense, to do so would take away much of the fun. After all, no reader of *Medea* or *Phaedra* can avoid wondering how works of such extraordinary, even tropical luxuriance could have been penned by the same author who fiercely (if anything *too* fiercely), advertises elsewhere the virtues of stylistic restraint and moderation. The fluid state of Senecan chronology in general, and not just that of the tragedies, makes it impossible to advance a model of diachronic evolution and compels us to read the *corpus* as an unnaturally static organism, with all its lines of tension prominently and seductively displayed.

The critical debate on the relationship between philosophy and tragedy in Seneca revolves around a predictably limited range of options. It is fair to say that the presumption of a connection, or even the desire to establish a solidarity of intents between the two domains, is still widespread. The emphasis, of course, varies widely, between those who tend to see in the tragedies and the prose work a similar ideological bent, and those more inclined to read in the tragedies a denunciation, if not a complete subversion, of the prose works' restrained optimism. In an interesting, if somewhat

dogmatic, monograph Joachim Dingel has argued that the tragedies stand as a collective rejection of the Stoic philosophical principles advocated in Seneca's prose works, and that they give voice to the author's truer and deeper feelings.<sup>32</sup> One of the fundamental shortcomings of Dingel's 'Romantic' approach lies in the sweeping generalization on which it is based. By pitting 'tragedies' and 'prose works' against each other he forces very different texts into two seemingly homogeneous and compact categories. Surely no one would deny the consistency which characterizes the tragedies as a whole, in matters both stylistic and psychological. And a similar assessment can probably be made about the prose works, which display a broader range of modes, styles and tendencies, in part because of their diverse generic affiliations. But any interpretation of the relationship between the prose works and the tragedies which downplays the specific characteristics of each individual work is unsatisfactory, and may at best offer a general suggestion – almost a metaphor – of that relationship. As I mentioned briefly above, it would certainly be rewarding to highlight in Seneca's prose the inner tensions it is often unable to repress.<sup>33</sup> Even there, for instance, the well-known contradiction between the theoretical dictates of stylistic immediacy and the actual richness and rhetorical complexity of the style is a strong enough indication that significant conflicts may be lurking not too deep beneath the surface.

## VI

Having briefly attempted to establish the premise that Senecan poetry and Senecan prose should be considered equally relevant in the attempt to understand the principles of the author's poetics, I would now like to turn to the explicit remarks regarding the nature of poetry and poetic inspiration which Seneca offers at several points in his essays.

In the process of representing the evolution of their plots, Juno, Medea, Atreus and, to a certain extent, Oedipus reveal the passions of *furor*, *ira* and *metus* as the sources which will inspire and animate their endeavours. These passages seem to amount to a very strong case for the genetic connection between passions and poetry, since they indirectly represent poetry as arising from a deeply passionate realm which has no room for reason. In his prose writings Seneca confronts this very issue and tries to resolve in several different ways the obvious tension between an 'enthusiastic' view of poetry and his teaching on the dangers of passions. In the pages that

<sup>32</sup> Dingel (1974).

<sup>33</sup> Interesting observations in Moretti (1995) and Too (1994).

follow, I address especially these attempts at resolution and connect them with the metadramatic features that I have already discussed, with the aim of reconstructing some aspects of Seneca's theory of tragedy and tragic passions.

The connection between poetry and *furor* (in the sense of *enthousiasmos*) dates back to Democritus and Plato.<sup>34</sup> According to the *Phaedrus* (245a), which Seneca translates at *De tranquillitate animi* 17.10, 'the sane mind (*compos sui*) knocks in vain at the door of poetry'.<sup>35</sup> The enthused poet who transgresses his human limitations to reach out to the sublime nature of creation is mentioned several times by Seneca, and *De tranquillitate animi* offers a particularly interesting set of reflections. In the first chapter of the dialogue, Serenus voices his misgivings (I.14):

Then again, when my mind has been uplifted by the greatness of its thoughts (*cogitationum magnitudine*), it becomes ambitious of words, and with higher aspirations it desires higher expression, and language issues forth to match the dignity of the theme; forgetful then of my rule and of my more restrained judgement, I am swept to loftier heights by an utterance that is no longer my own (*oblitus tum legis pressiorisque iudicii sublimius feror et ore iam non meo*).

Seneca replies that this need not be interpreted as the sign of a continuing sickness, but as the natural oscillation of a body not yet accustomed to its new health. By the end of the book, it is Seneca himself who admits that a moderate amount of relaxation (*remissio*, 17.5) and moderation of efforts (*temperamentum*, 17.7) are a necessary counterbalance for even the most temperate of souls. Even a certain degree of 'drunkenness' (*ebrietas*) can be welcome (17.8):

At times we ought to reach the point even of intoxication, not drowning ourselves in drink, yet succumbing to it; for it washes away troubles, and stirs the mind from its very depths and heals its sorrow just as it does certain ills of the body; and the inventor of wine is not called the Releaser (*Liber*) on account of the licence it gives to the tongue, but because it frees the mind from bondage to cares and emancipates it and gives it new life and makes it bolder in all that it attempts. But, as in freedom, so in wine there is a wholesome moderation.

This leads rapidly to the conclusion of the dialogue, the *locus classicus* for the Senecan theory of the enthused poet (17.10–11):

<sup>34</sup> Indeed *enthousiasmos* appears to be the invention of philosophers; see Tigerstedt (1970), with Finkelberg (1998) 19–20.

<sup>35</sup> The most explicit Latin statement for this notion of poetic enthusiasm, ultimately Democritean and Platonic, is probably Cic. *De or.* 2.194; see also *Tusc.* 1.64, and Pease's commentary ad loc. for further indications.

For whether we believe with the Greek poet that ‘sometimes it is a pleasure also to rave,’ or with Plato that ‘the sane mind knocks in vain at the door of poetry,’ or with Aristotle that ‘no great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness’: be that as it may, the lofty utterance that rises above the attempts of others (*grande aliquid et super ceteros*) is impossible unless the mind is excited (*mota*). When it has scorned the vulgar and the commonplace, and has soared far aloft fired by divine inspiration, then alone it chants a strain too lofty for mortal lips (*aliquid cecinit grandius ore mortali*). So long as it is left to itself, it is impossible for it to reach any sublime (*sublime*) and difficult height; it must forsake the common track and be driven to frenzy and champ the bit and run away with its rider and rush to a height that it would have feared to climb by itself.

Although Seneca is not engaged here in an explicit declaration of poetics, and is addressing rather the issue of philosophical reflection, the presence of the Platonic quotation and the term *cecinit* (17.11) suggests that the same state of enthusiastic lack of control lies behind artistic creation and philosophical excitement.<sup>36</sup>

The idea that μεγαλοψυχία – *magnitudo animi*, ‘greatness of soul’ – is inextricably connected with μεγαλοφροσύνη – *magnitudo ingenii*, ‘elevation of thought’<sup>37</sup> – and that the latter finds expression in the ‘sublime’ (ὑψος) is rooted in Cleanthes’ theory that poetry, thanks to metre, song and rhythm, is the only means which can adequately express ‘divine greatness’ (θεῖα μεγέθη).<sup>38</sup> Seneca, too, shares the idea that ‘the beauty of things’ generates enthusiasm, as he declares in rather extreme terms in *Letters to Lucilius* 108.7:

A certain number are stirred by high-sounding phrases, and adapt themselves to the emotions of the speaker with lively change of face and mind – just like the emasculated Phrygian priests (*Phrygii . . . semiviri*) who are wont to be roused by the sound of the flute and go mad (*furentes*) to order. But the true hearer is ravished and stirred by the beauty of the subject matter, not by the jingle of empty words (*rapit illos instigatque rerum pulchritudo, non verborum inanium sonitus*).

The explicitly irrational overtones that mark the vocabulary of inspiration in this passage and make it so similar to its poetic counterparts are quite surprising in the light of the Stoic strictures against passions.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> I will return more extensively later to the importance of the sublime in the poetics of *Thyestes*. See below, pp. 127–32. On the issue in general see Michel (1969).

<sup>37</sup> See Ps.-Longinus, *Subl.* 7.3. <sup>38</sup> *SVF* 1.486. See Mazzoli (1970) 47.

<sup>39</sup> It is even more important that these passages confirm quite explicitly that yielding to passions constitutes also a superior form of knowledge. The enthusiasm of the poet or the philosopher is what enables him to apprehend θεῖα μεγέθη which prose, i.e. a rational and controlled form of expression, would be unfit to represent (Cleanthes puts it precisely in these terms in the fragment I alluded to above, n. 38).

While, in this particular context, the orgiastic frenzy of the converted is justified by their sources of inspiration and their goals, more complex problems arise if we try to apply this theory to poetry in general. In his wide-ranging analysis of the issue, Giancarlo Mazzoli has argued that, following Posidonius' strictures against Chrysippus' theory of 'apathy' (ἀπάθεια), Seneca is here embracing Peripatetic elements, namely the notion that a controlled and moderate excitement can in fact lead to 'cheerfulness' (εὐθυμία).<sup>40</sup> According to Mazzoli, this explanation holds true for poetry as a whole. But the vocabulary of *Letter* 108.7, with its references to the 'Phrygian eunuchs' (*Phrygii semiviri*), does not suggest moderation and control. And even if this explanation can be considered satisfactory in the specific case of *philosophical* enthusiasm, it becomes more difficult to apply it to poetry in general, since poetry is not bound to the exclusive representation of philosophical examples (*paradeigmata*). Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* would plausibly fall into this category, but Seneca's tragedies, with their powerful representations of negative examples, are a different matter altogether.

This problem is enhanced by other Senecan passages which show a considerable degree of ambivalence towards poetry. At *De brevitate vitae* 16.5 Seneca attacks the frenzy (*furor*) of the poets that nurtures the errors of men by offering lascivious images of the behaviour of gods. *Furor* is recognized here explicitly as an error of the poets who abandon moral themes and educational messages.<sup>41</sup> As other passages make eloquently clear, poets are not bound by the respect for truth or morality.<sup>42</sup> Their inspiration is potentially dangerous precisely because it transcends, 'like an oracle' (*more oraculi*),<sup>43</sup> the limits of human rationality: this can lead to the possibility of speaking, 'with a voice greater than human' (*grandius ore mortali*),<sup>44</sup> great philosophical truths, or, on the contrary, of depicting falsehoods in appealing terms and deceiving mankind. Like Hesiod's Muses, who can say many true things but also many false things resembling truth (*Theog.* 27–8), the poets are ambiguous and ultimately unreliable sources who should be constantly checked for accuracy and moral worthiness.

I emphasize, again, the chthonic aspect of poetry and the ambivalent nature of the poet because these are the elements that resonate most dramatically in the tragedies. When he describes the soul of the irate man, at *De ira* 2.35.4, Seneca compares it with the terrible fictional underworld created by poets:

<sup>40</sup> Mazzoli (1970) 55–6.

<sup>41</sup> See *De vita beata* 26.6.

<sup>42</sup> See *Ben.* 1.3.10; 1.4.5.

<sup>43</sup> See *De brevitate vitae* 2.2.

<sup>44</sup> See *Tranq.* 17.11.

As is the aspect of an enemy or wild beasts wet with the blood of slaughter or bent upon slaughter; as are the hellish monsters of the poet's brain, all girt about with snakes and breathing fire; as are those most hideous shapes that issue forth from hell to stir up wars and scatter discord among the peoples and tear peace all to shreds; as such let us picture anger . . .

Erinys and the Furies are just fictions, Seneca says, and in fact, as he points out in *Consolatio ad Marciam* 19.4, the whole apparatus of punishment in the underworld is a product of poetic craftsmanship:

Reflect that there are no ills to be suffered after death, that the reports that make the Lower World terrible to us are mere tales, that no darkness is in store for the dead, no prison, no blazing streams of fire, no river of Lethe, that no judgement-seats are there, nor culprits, nor in that freedom so unfettered are there a second time any tyrants. All these things are the fancies of the poets, who have harrowed us with groundless terrors (*luserunt ista poetae et vanis nos agitavere terroribus*).

Poets create fictional representations devoid of truth and use them to stir human souls with empty terrors: the close connection established here between 'play' (*lusus*) and *terror* is particularly striking.

Poetry springs from the same form of enthusiastic *furor* as that which generates the inspired sublimity of the philosopher, but it is not confined to great moral truths. Its morality and educational potential are linked to its contents: poetry can instruct, but can also deceive and mislead, and exploit its capacity to strike the mind for objectionable purposes. It has a positive function when it celebrates the beauty of 'divine greatness' (θεῖα μέγέθη), as, again, in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*. But what happens when it generates examples of vices, as do so many tragedies? How do these examples, presented through the powerful means of poetic expression, affect the audience?

These are the main questions that will accompany this exploration of *Thyestes*, a play dominated by the ambiguously attractive figure of Atreus; a play, to be sure, that makes it exceedingly difficult to evaluate the nature and purpose of poetry, which is rooted, as it clearly is in *Thyestes*, in the disruptive world of passions. I will leave to the very end of this book, after engaging at length with appealing portraits of evil and less than compelling attempts at moral rectitude, to examine the effects that the tragic text might have on the audience, and how it could be deemed compatible with the Stoic requirement that poetry have an educational function.